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The sense of humor : explorations of a personality characteristic

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Is sense of humor a positive personality characteristic?

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Much of contemporary psychological research on humor is based on the assumption that a sense of humor is a positive and desirable personality characteristic that enhances psychological health and well-being. Researchers generally assume that individuals with a greater sense of humor possess a number of other desirable traits, such as greater optimism, self-acceptance, self-confidence, and autonomy. Humorous people are also thought to be able to cope more effectively with stress, to generally experience less negative moods such as depression and anxiety, to enjoy greater physical health, and to have more positive and healthy relationships with others (Kuiper & Olinger in press). In recent years, these positive views of humor have given rise to a burgeoning "humor and health" movement whose proponents, through workshops, seminars, and popular books, seek to promote greater expression of humor in schools, hospitals, psychotherapy settings, and the workplace. These ideas have also gained wide attention in the popular media, where magazine articles and television programs frequently extol the benefits of humor and laughter.

A number of personality theorists have discussed the importance of a sense of humor in psychological health. Abraham Maslow (1954) found a "philosophical, unhostile sense of humor" to be one of the psychologically healthy characteristics of people whom he described as "self-actualizing." Gordon Allport (1961) viewed a "mature sense of humor," involving the ability to laugh at oneself while maintaining a sense of self-acceptance, as a characteristic of the healthy personality. Other characteristics of such personalities, according to Allport, include a positive and integrated sense of self, warm relationships with others, realistic perceptions, a unifying philosophy of life, and insight into oneself. Both of these authors, however, distinguished between a "healthy" or "mature" sense of humor, which they considered to be relatively rare, and the more common forms of humor based on punning, witty repartee, and jokes that express aggressive and sexual themes.

Both Maslow and Allport, along with other humanistic and psychodynamic theorists such as Carl Rogers (1961), Carl Gustav Jung (1933), and Erik Erikson (1950), argued that healthy psychological functioning is more than just the absence of psychopathology. They emphasized the importance of including more positive

aspects of well-being, personal growth, and quality of life in our understanding of healthy functioning. Thus, in addition to the absence of negative affect, such as depression and anxiety, positive personality, in their view, includes a focus on such characteristics as problem-solving abilities, coping skills, and interpersonal relating abilities that contribute to increased levels of positive self-esteem, greater life satisfaction, and more positive affect. A healthy or mature sense of humor may be viewed as part of a constellation of positive personality characteristics that enhances general well-being.

In light of the above, the purpose of this chapter is to examine the various positive aspects of sense of humor. This examination consists of two parts. In the first part we will explore the degree to which sense of humor is empirically related to other positive personality characteristics, such as optimism, autonomy, and personal growth. Past literature suggests that these positive personality constructs are generally viewed as clustering together. Accordingly, the important question addressed here is the extent to which contemporary self-report measures of sense of humor tap into the same domains as these other measures of positive personality. In the second part we will assess the degree to which each of these measures of personality, including sense of humor, is related to an individual's level of affect and sociability. Again, past findings suggest that positive personality characteristics, such as optimism, environmental mastery, and personal growth, contribute to higher levels of positive functioning within an individual. This enhanced functioning includes higher levels of self-esteem, lower levels of negative affect (i.e., lower depression and anxiety), and more positive social perceptions and relationships. As such, we are particularly interested in comparing the degree to which sense of humor, relative to these other measures of positive personality, may also relate to enhanced self-esteem, reduce negative affect, and more facilitative social perceptions.

Sense of humor as a positive personality construct

In this discussion we conceptualize sense of humor as a fairly stable personality trait or individual-difference variable, involving a general tendency to engage in humor-related behaviors across a range of situations (Martin 1996; Ruch 1996). We further assume that sense of humor is a multidimensional construct composed of a number of distinct components. No one measure of sense of humor is likely to capture all of its dimensions. In our research, we have therefore made use of different measures of sense of humor to assess several important components or dimensions of this construct.

One component of sense of humor that we view as particularly important in the context of positive or healthy personality is the tendency to maintain a humorous

perspective in the face of adversity, and to use humor as a means of coping with stressors in one's daily life. The 7-item Coping Humor Scale (CHS; Martin & Lefcourt 1983) has been developed to measure this coping aspect of humor. This scale contains items such as "I have often found that my problems have been greatly reduced when I tried to find something funny in them," and "I can usually find something to laugh or joke about even in trying situations." Respondents are asked to rate the degree to which they agree or disagree with each item on a 4-point scale.

Another aspect of sense of humor is laughter responsiveness, or the tendency to laugh and smile and otherwise display amusement in a wide range of situations. We have assessed this facet of humor by means of the Situational Humor Response Questionnaire (SHRQ; Martin & Lefcourt 1984). This scale is composed of 21 items that describe situations that people find themselves in from time to time, such as "You were eating in a restaurant and the waiter accidentally spilled a drink on you." Respondents are asked to rate the degree to which they would normally smile and/or laugh in each situation using a 5-point scale.

We have also made use of two 7-item subscales of Svebak's (1974b) Sense of Humor Questionnaire to assess additional facets of sense of humor. The first of these, the Metamessage Sensitivity scale (SHQ-MS) is designed to measure the degree to which the individual is able to perceive humorous aspects of the environment and to catch on to jokes and witty comments (e.g., "I can usually find something comical, witty, or humorous in most situations"; "I would say that I have much cause for amusement during an ordinary day"). Finally, the Liking of Humor scale (SHQ-LH) measures individuals' attitudes towards humor, particularly the degree to which they place a high value on humor and humorous people (e.g., "Humorists irritate me because they so blatantly revel in getting others to laugh"; disagreement with this item leads to a higher score). Good psychometric properties have been demonstrated for all four of these measures of humor (see Lefcourt & Martin 1986; Martin 1996 for detailed reviews).

In our past research we have found these four measures of humor to be significantly but only moderately intercorrelated (e.g., Kuiper & Martin 1993), supporting our assumption that they address different central facets of sense of humor. We recognize that there are likely other aspects of sense of humor that are not tapped by these measures. For example, these scales do not measure humor appreciation, or the degree to which individuals prefer various types or styles of humor.

Previous research has provided some degree of support for the popular view of sense of humor as a positive personality characteristic that has facilitative effects on psychological health and well-being. First, in our early studies we found evidence for *stress-moderating effects* of sense of humor (for reviews see Lefcourt & Martin 1986; Lefcourt & Thomas this volume; Martin 1996). These studies demonstrated that individuals with a greater sense of humor are less adversely affected by stressful

life events, as shown, for example, by less increase in negative moods such as depression and anxiety (Martin & Lefcourt 1983), and less decrease in immune functioning as measured by secretory immunoglobulin A (Martin & Dobbin 1988).

Subsequent studies examined more closely the processes by which sense of humor may be involved in coping with stress. For example, Kuiper et al. (1993) found that individuals with higher levels of coping humor, as assessed by the CHS, were more likely to appraise an upcoming academic examination as a positive challenge rather than a negative threat, and to subsequently evaluate their own performance and adjust their expectations for future performance in a more realistic and self-protective manner. Thus, the stress-moderating effects of sense of humor appear to operate, at least in part, through more positive appraisals and more realistic cognitive processing of environmental information (see also Kuiper et al. 1995).

Second, besides the stress-buffering effects, we have also found some evidence of *positive enhancement effects* of sense of humor. Kuiper and Martin (1993) found that individuals with higher scores on various humor measures had higher levels of self-esteem, less discrepancy between their actual and ideal self-concepts, and more stable self-concepts, and were less likely to endorse dysfunctional self-evaluative standards and irrational, excessive contingencies for perceptions of self-worth (see also Martin et al. 1993). In addition, sense of humor has been found to be significantly related to extraversion (Korotkov & Hannah 1994; Ruch 1994b; Ruch & Deckers 1993), which is the dimension in Eysenck's personality system that is most highly related to positive psychological functioning. Korotkov and Hannah (1994) also found a positive correlation of .40 between coping humor and dispositional optimism, as measured by the Life Orientation Test.

Finally, previous research has provided evidence that sense of humor *facilitates social and interpersonal interactions*. Hampes (1992) found significantly higher interpersonal intimacy and lower social isolation among participants with higher levels of laughter responsiveness (SHRQ). In addition, sense of humor scores were significantly related to higher endorsement of self-descriptive adjectives reflecting sociability among university students (Kuiper & Martin 1993) as well as among clinically depressed patients, but not schizophrenics (Kuiper et al. in press).

To summarize, previous research has provided some evidence that sense of humor may be viewed as a multidimensional positive personality characteristic with a number of facilitative effects. These include stress-reduction and positive enhancement effects ranging from more positive cognitive appraisals of life events to more facilitative social and interpersonal interactions. Thus, there is already some evidence for the popular notion that sense of humor is one aspect of a broader constellation of positive personality characteristics that may then impact on increased psychological health.

The present studies

We now turn our attention to novel data from five studies we have conducted over the past few years. These studies were completed by ourselves, along with several other researchers in our lab, namely, Lisa Destun, Joan Hillson, Sandra McKenzie, Carlos Melendez, and Kathy Winter. Taken together, the five studies involved a total of over 800 participants drawn from the introductory psychology subject pool at the University of Western Ontario. The sample sizes and measures included in each study are summarized in Table 1. In two of the studies, all four of the sense of humor scales were administered to participants, while the other three studies, due to time constraints, included only the Coping Humor Scale, which we consider to be particularly relevant to a "healthy" form of humor. In addition, the participants in these studies completed two other measures that tap various aspects of positive personality. These are: (1) the Life Orientation Test (LOT; Scheier & Carver 1985), a measure of dispositional optimism; and (2) the Ryff Measure of Psychological Well-Being (Ryff 1989), which assesses such positive personality characteristics as self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, and autonomy. Thus, these two measures address many of the positive personality characteristics that are commonly assumed to be related to sense of humor, as we noted earlier. Correlations between these two personality measures and the humor scales will be examined to determine the degree to which sense of humor converges with these additional aspects of positive personality.

These studies also included a variety of other measures that relate to the two general areas of affect and sociability, broadly conceived. Here we are further interested in the extent to which sense of humor, when compared to these other positive personality characteristics, may show similar or different relationships with these two general areas of functioning. If very similar patterns of relationships are found, then this would further suggest a sizeable overlap between sense of humor and the other positive personality dimensions.

The relationship between humor and optimism

The potential relationship between humor and optimism is underscored by the fact that sense of humor is commonly seen as involving a generally positive outlook on life. Individuals with a greater sense of humor are typically viewed as people who are more likely to seek challenges, to have more life-affirming attitudes, and to approach life's adversities in an optimistic manner. Indeed, as noted earlier, it is this popular view of sense of humor that has sparked our interest in providing some empirical data for this positive facilitative effect of humor.

Table 1. Summary of measures for each of the five samples

| |
|---|
| Sample 1: <i>N</i> = 200 (127 females, 73 males, mean age 20.2 yrs., range 18-46) |
| Coping Humor Scale |
| Situational Humor Response Questionnaire |
| Sense of Humor Questionnaire - Liking of Humor subscale |
| Sense of Humor Questionnaire - Metamessage Sensitivity subscale |
| Life Orientation Test |
| Self-concept Adjective Ratings (on Depressive Personality and Sociability) |
| Average Other Adjective Ratings (on Depressive Personality and Sociability) |
| World Assumptions Scale (8 subscales assessing general beliefs about the world) |
| Sample 2: <i>N</i> = 136 (79 females, 57 males, mean age 19.7 yrs., range 17-41) |
| Coping Humor Scale |
| Situational Humor Response Questionnaire |
| Sense of Humor Questionnaire - Liking of Humor subscale |
| Sense of Humor Questionnaire - Metamessage Sensitivity subscale |
| Ryff Measure of Psychological Well-Being - 6 original subscales |
| Fear of Negative Evaluations |
| Social Avoidance and Distress Scale |
| Sample 3: <i>N</i> = 166 (96 females, 70 males, mean age 20.0 yrs., range 17-35) |
| Coping Humor Scale |
| Life Orientation Test |
| Ryff Measure of Psychological Well-Being - 2 dimensions |
| Fear of Negative Evaluations |
| Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory |
| Costello-Comrey Depression and Anxiety Scale |
| Sample 4: <i>N</i> = 186 (125 females, 61 males, mean age 20.5 yrs., range 18-39) |
| Coping Humor Scale |
| Ryff Measure of Psychological Well-Being - 2 dimensions |
| Fear of Negative Evaluations |
| Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory |
| Costello-Comrey Depression and Anxiety Scale |
| Sample 5: <i>N</i> = 204 (139 females, 65 males, mean age 19.8 yrs., range 18-48) |
| Coping Humor Scale |
| Life Orientation Test |
| Ryff Measure of Psychological Well-Being - 2 dimensions |
| Fear of Negative Evaluations |
| Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory |
| Costello-Comrey Depression and Anxiety Scale |

Scheier and Carver (1985, 1987, 1992) define dispositional optimism as the general tendency to expect favorable outcomes in life. Due to their more positive expectations, optimists, as compared to pessimists, are more likely to persist in goal-directed behaviors in the face of difficulty or adversity. Scheier and Carver (1985) constructed the Life Orientation Test (LOT) to measure individual differences in dispositional optimism, or the degree to which individuals maintain generalized ex-

pectancies of positive outcomes in a wide range of situations. Typical items on this measure include, "I always look on the bright side of things" and "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best." Respondents indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with each of 13 items on a 5-point scale. The LOT has been demonstrated to have good reliability and validity.

In research examining a variety of populations, optimism as measured by the LOT, has been found to be related to both psychological and physical health (Carver & Gaines 1987; Carver et al. 1993; Scheier et al. 1989). Optimism is positively related to self-esteem, and negatively related to hopelessness, depression, perceived stress, alienation, and social anxiety (Scheier & Carver 1985). Optimists report better relationships with friends, higher job satisfaction, and a generally higher quality of life than do pessimists (Scheier & Carver 1992). In addition, optimists cope more effectively with stress than do pessimists, dealing more directly with the problem at hand, accepting the reality of the situation, seeking social support, and making more positive reappraisals (Scheier & Carver 1987). Optimists view day to day events as less stressful, perceiving situations as more of a positive challenge than a negative threat, and viewing their problems as more solvable, whereas pessimists engage in denial and withdraw from problems as a method of coping (Scheier & Carver 1992). In summary, dispositional optimism is an important aspect of positive personality, and as such, it might be expected to be related to sense of humor as well.

Turning to the present studies, for sample 1 we found significant but weak correlations between optimism and laughter responsiveness (SHRQ), liking of humor (SHQ-LH), and metamessage sensitivity (SHQ-MS) (see Table 2). The correlation between optimism and coping humor (CHS), however, was not significant in this sample. In sample 5 a significant relationship was found between optimism and coping humor, whereas this relationship was not significant in sample 3. Although Korotkov and Hannah (1994) reported a moderate correlation of .40 between optimism and coping humor, the results of our studies suggest minimal overlap be-

Table 2. Sense of humor and optimism

| Sense of humor measures | Optimism measure (LOT) |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| CHS | Sample 1 $r = .11$ |
| | Sample 3 $r = .14$ |
| | Sample 5 $r = .28^{***}$ |
| SHRQ | Sample 1 $r = .16^{**}$ |
| SHQ-LH | Sample 1 $r = .18^{**}$ |
| SHQ-MS | Sample 1 $r = .17^{**}$ |

** $p < .025$; *** $p < .01$.

tween dispositional optimism and sense of humor. Even when the correlations were significant, they accounted for only a small proportion of the common variance (i.e., 2.6% to 7.8%). Thus, although we may expect people with a greater sense of humor to be more optimistic in their outlook on life, these studies suggest that this relationship is quite weak at best. It would appear that individuals with a greater sense of humor (at least as measured by these scales) are not much more likely than those with less humor to maintain an optimistic outlook on life.

Relationship between sense of humor and psychological well-being

The second approach to positive personality that we have selected stems from a broad-based, theoretically driven, integrated framework of well-being developed by Carol Ryff (1989). Ryff reviewed a variety of psychological literature of differing perspectives (psychodynamic, humanistic, and life span development), including the work of Jung, Maslow, Rogers, Allport, Erikson, Bühler, Neugarten, and Jahoda. For example, she considered Maslow's (1968) conception of the self-actualized individual, Rogers' (1961) view of the fully functioning person, Jung's (1933) formulation of individuation, and Allport's (1961) conception of maturity. She concluded that there are several points of commonality across most of these theorists in the characteristics that they considered to be important features of positive psychological functioning. Ryff (1989) identified six major dimensions of convergence among these positive personality theorists: *self-acceptance*, *positive relations with others*, *autonomy*, *environmental mastery*, *purpose in life*, and *personal growth*.

Based on her review, Ryff (1989) developed a measure of psychological well-being that contains six subscales, one for each rationally derived dimension. This measure is composed of 83 self-descriptive items which respondents rate on a 6-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." People who are high in *self-acceptance* have a positive attitude towards themselves, acknowledge both good and bad personal qualities, and feel positive about life experiences (e.g., "In general, I feel confident and positive about myself"). The person who is high in *positive relations with others* has an ability to have warm, satisfying, trusting relationships; is capable of strong empathy, affection, and intimacy; is concerned about the welfare of others; and understands the give and take of human relationships (e.g., "I feel like I get a lot out of my relationships"). High scorers on the *purpose in life* dimension have goals and a sense of directedness, hold beliefs that give life purpose, and feel there is meaning in both present and past experiences (e.g., "I have a sense of direction and purpose in life").

Individuals who are high on the dimension of *personal growth* have a feeling of continued development, see themselves as growing and expanding, are open to new

experiences, have a sense of realizing their potentials, and are changing in ways that reflect more self-knowledge and effectiveness (e.g., "In general, I feel that I continue to learn more about myself as time goes by"). High scorers on the *autonomy* dimension are self-determining and independent, are able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways, regulate their behavior from within, and evaluate themselves by their own standards (e.g., "My decisions are not usually influenced by what everyone else is doing"). Finally, the person who is high in *mastery* has a sense of competence in managing the environment, makes effective use of external opportunities, and is able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values (e.g., "In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live"). The correlations among these six subscales range from .32 to .76.

Ryff and Keyes (1995) reviewed research relating scores on the Ryff scale to various measures of happiness, life satisfaction, and depression. Happiness has been found to have quite strong relationships with both self-acceptance and environmental mastery, and moderate relationships with purpose in life and autonomy. Life satisfaction was quite highly related to self-acceptance, purpose in life, and environmental mastery. Depression, in turn, was highly negatively related to self-acceptance, purpose in life, and environmental mastery. Ryff (1989) also reported high correlations between her measure and other measures of positive functioning such as self-esteem, and morale. Overall, then, the dimensions assessed by the Ryff measure would seem to be aspects of positive personality that might also be expected to be related to sense of humor.

As shown in Table 3, four of our studies examined how sense of humor relates to the positive aspects of personality assessed by Ryff's measure. Unexpectedly, the majority of the sample 1 correlations between each of the four components of sense of humor and the six dimensions of the Ryff measure were nonsignificant (ranging

Table 3. Sense of humor and psychological well-being

| Sense of humor measures | Psychological well-being measure | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Ryff - Personal Growth Scale | |
| CHS | Sample 1 | $r = .35^{****}$ |
| SHRQ | Sample 1 | $r = .27^{****}$ |
| SHQ-LH | Sample 1 | $r = .28^{****}$ |
| SHQ-MS | Sample 1 | $r = .39^{****}$ |
| | Ryff-PI | Ryff-PR |
| CHS | Sample 3 | $r = .21^{***}$ $r = .12$ |
| | Sample 4 | $r = .19^*$ $r = .14$ |
| | Sample 5 | $r = .26^{***}$ $r = .17^*$ |

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$; **** $p < .001$.

from .02 to .22). This suggests that there is very little overlap between sense of humor and most of these positive personality dimensions. A notable exception in sample 1 was the personal growth dimension, which was found to be significantly related to all four components of sense of humor, namely, coping humor, laughter responsiveness, metamessage sensitivity, and liking of humor (see Table 3). Thus, individuals with a greater sense of humor are more likely to view themselves as growing and expanding, have a feeling of continued development, are open to new experiences, and have a sense of realizing their potentials. Additional significant correlations in sample 1 were: autonomy with metamessage sensitivity (SHQ-MS: $r = .32$) and liking humor (SHQ-LH: $r = .24$); and positive relations with others with laughter responsiveness (SHRQ: $r = .30$, all p 's < .001). Surprisingly, no significant relations were found between any of the four humor components and environmental mastery, purpose in life, or self-acceptance; all of which would seem to be facets that are commonly viewed as related to sense of humor.

The remaining correlations in Table 3 are between the coping humor scale and the two superordinate factors of the Ryff measure. Recent empirical work in our lab by Hillson (1997) suggests that the 83 items of the Ryff measure can be factor analyzed into three factors, two of which may be seen as components of positive personality (labeled *positive individualism* and *positive relatedness*), while the third has to do with more negative, unhealthy functioning. *Positive individualism* reflects an acceptance of oneself, a purpose or sense of meaning in one's life, feelings of independence or autonomous functioning, and overall mastery of one's life. It is composed of items from the *self-acceptance*, *purpose in life*, *autonomy*, *environmental mastery*, and *personal growth* scales. Employing a new sample, Hillson (1997) has found the items comprising this factor to have an internal consistency alpha of .94. In contrast, the *positive relatedness* factor is comprised mainly of items from the *positive relations with others* subscale of the Ryff measure, and reflects both the giving and receiving inherent in healthy adult relationships (with an internal consistency alpha of .84). As such, these two factors appear to represent two major dimensions of positive personality, the first having to do with autonomy, mastery, and self-acceptance within the individual, and the second with the quality and maturity of one's relationships with others.

As shown in Table 3, significant correlations were found in samples 3, 4, and 5 between coping humor and *positive individualism* (Ryff-PI). The correlation between coping humor (CHS) and *positive relatedness* (Ryff-PR) was significant in sample 5, but nonsignificant in both samples 3 and 4. Thus, coping humor does seem to overlap to some degree with *positive individualism*, although these two constructs are certainly not highly related, as the correlations are only around .20 (i.e., sharing only 4% common variance). In contrast, coping humor does not seem to be associated with *positive relatedness*, suggesting that individuals who make

greater use of humor in coping with stress do not necessarily have more positive relationships with others.

In two of our studies we were also able to examine the relationship between the Ryff factors and optimism. A strong correlation was found between optimism and *positive individualism* in both samples 3 and 5 (r 's = .69 and .71, respectively, p 's < .001). The relationship between optimism and *positive relatedness* was also significant, but more moderate (Sample 3: $r = .36$, $p < .001$; Sample 5: $r = .47$, $p < .001$). Thus, optimism appears to overlap much more strongly with the two major factors of positive personality tapped by the Ryff measure (especially *positive individualism*), than does sense of humor.

Humor, optimism, psychological well-being, and affect

These studies also provided us with some data on the correlations of each of these measures of positive personality with a variety of measures of both affect and sociability, broadly defined. By comparing the patterns of correlations found with humor to the patterns found with optimism and psychological well-being, we could examine further the degree to which these measures tap into similar personality domains. We now turn our attention to the data relating to affect, which encompasses measures of self-esteem, anxiety, and depression.

Self-esteem. Past research findings indicate that self-esteem, which can be defined as a global affective evaluation of one's self-concept (Kuiper & Martin 1993), is positively related to optimism (Scheier & Carver 1992) and several of the positive personality dimensions tapped by the Ryff scale (Ryff & Keyes 1995). In light of our proposal that sense of humor may contribute to positive enhancement effects for an individual (Kuiper & Olinger in press; Martin 1996), we hypothesized that sense of humor would be positively correlated with self-esteem. To test this prediction, three of the present samples included the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (RSEI; Rosenberg 1979), a 10-item scale including such items as: "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" and "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." Responses are made on a 4-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The correlations shown in Table 4 reveal quite strong relationships between optimism and self-esteem, and between self-esteem and *positive individualism*. The correlations between self-esteem and *positive relatedness* were also significant, but somewhat lower. Finally, coping humor was also significantly related to self-esteem in all three samples, although the correlations were of a more modest size, consistent with those found in previous research (Kuiper & Martin 1993; Martin 1996). Thus, coping humor shows the expected positive relation to self-esteem, al-

Table 4. Sense of humor, positive personality and self-esteem, anxiety, and depression

| | Sample | Self-esteem (RSEI) | Anxiety (CCDAS) | Depression (CCDAS) |
|---------|--------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| CHS | 3 | .26**** | -.25**** | -.28**** |
| | 4 | .30**** | -.25**** | -.38**** |
| | 5 | .34**** | -.43**** | -.22**** |
| LOT | 3 | .56**** | -.46**** | -.67**** |
| | 5 | .66**** | -.40**** | -.75**** |
| Ryff-PI | 3 | .69**** | -.46**** | -.79**** |
| | 4 | .71**** | -.59**** | -.68**** |
| | 5 | .79*** | -.37**** | -.78**** |
| Ryff-PR | 3 | .37**** | -.25**** | -.45**** |
| | 4 | .35**** | -.28**** | -.39**** |
| | 5 | .48**** | -.50**** | -.49**** |

*** $p < .01$; **** $p < .001$.

though the shared common variance is relatively low (ranging from 6.7% to 11.6%). In contrast, *positive individualism* and optimism both show much more common variance with self-esteem (from 31.3% to 62.4%); while the common variance shared between *positive relatedness* and self-esteem is lower (from 12.25% to 23%), but still notably greater than that with coping humor.

Anxiety and depression. People who are more psychologically healthy are expected to experience less negative affect, such as anxiety and depression. In past work, the relation between sense of humor and negative affect has been somewhat mixed. Lefcourt and Martin (1986) found only very weak negative simple correlations, and noted that levels of life stress need to be examined in order to understand the relationship between humor and affect disturbance. In other words, it is the interaction between sense of humor and life stress that predicts levels of affect disturbance, rather than sense of humor by itself. Some other researchers have, however, reported modest negative relationships between sense of humor and negative affect (Kuiper & Olinger in press; Martin 1996).

In three of the present studies we made use of the Costello-Comrey Depression and Anxiety Scale (CCDAS; Costello & Comrey 1967) to measure negative affect. This measure contains 14 items assessing depression and 9 items tapping anxiety. Respondents rate the frequency of occurrence of each symptom on a 9-point scale. Examples of depression items are: "I want to run away from everything" and "The future looks so gloomy that I wonder if I should go on." Anxiety items include: "I am a tense and high-strung person" and "My hand shakes when I try to do something."

As shown in Table 4, optimism and *positive individualism* were both quite strongly negatively related to depression, and moderately to anxiety. Positive relatedness showed a similar moderate pattern for anxiety, but only a moderate relationship with depression. The correlations between coping humor and negative affect were also significant, but much more modest than those described above. Thus, the pattern of correlations with negative affect was quite similar to the pattern found with self-esteem. Optimism and *positive individualism* appear to be quite strongly negatively related to depression and, to a lesser extent, to anxiety. The correlations between *positive relatedness* and negative affect are somewhat more moderate, and finally the correlations with coping humor, although significant, are quite modest. Thus, individuals who report using humor as a means of coping with stress have some tendency to report lower levels of anxiety and depression.

Humor, optimism, psychological well-being, and sociability measures

Besides self-esteem and negative affect, these data also allowed us to look at relationships between the measures of positive personality and several measures that can be broadly described as pertaining to aspects of sociability. In particular, this included such constructs as fear of negative evaluations, social avoidance and distress, perceptions of self and others, and general world assumptions. Again, the purpose of these analyses was to compare the patterns of correlations obtained with the humor dimensions to those obtained for the other aspects of positive personality.

Fear of negative evaluations. As discussed earlier, a proposed beneficial effect of sense of humor is that it also facilitates social and interpersonal interactions (Hampes 1992; Kuiper & Olinger in press). Accordingly, we hypothesized that sense of humor should be associated with increased sociability, which includes a reduced fear of negative evaluations by others. Fear of negative evaluations has been defined by Watson and Friend (1969) as apprehension about others' evaluations, distress over their negative evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively. Watson and Friend (1969) developed a 30-item self-report measure, the FNE, to assess the degree to which an individual fears receiving negative evaluations from others. Typical items include: "I rarely worry about seeming foolish to others," and "I am afraid that people will find fault with me."

Turning to Table 5, in samples 3 and 5, optimism was found to be significantly negatively related to fear of negative evaluations. *Positive individualism* was also negatively related to fear of negative evaluations in samples 3, 4, and 5. *Positive relatedness* showed a significant negative relationship with fear of negative evalua-

Table 5. Sense of humor, positive personality and negative sociability measures

| Fear of negative evaluations (FNE) | | Social avoidance and distress (SAD) | |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| CHS | Sample 2 $r = -.16$ | CHS | Sample 2 $r = -.35****$ |
| | Sample 3 $r = -.07$ | SHRQ | Sample 2 $r = -.33****$ |
| | Sample 4 $r = -.27****$ | SHQ-LH | Sample 2 $r = -.34****$ |
| | Sample 5 $r = -.34****$ | SHQ-MS | Sample 2 $r = -.44****$ |
| LOT | Sample 3 $r = -.39****$ | | |
| | Sample 5 $r = -.39****$ | | |
| Ryff-PI | Sample 3 $r = -.47****$ | | |
| | Sample 4 $r = -.51****$ | | |
| | Sample 5 $r = -.45***$ | | |
| Ryff-PR | Sample 3 $r = -.29****$ | | |
| | Sample 4 $r = -.23****$ | | |
| | Sample 5 $r = -.28****$ | | |

*** $p < .01$; **** $p < .001$.

tions, but at a more modest level than either optimism or *positive individualism*. In contrast, coping humor (CHS) was not significantly related to fear of negative evaluations in two of our samples, but moderately related in the remaining two samples. In sample 2, where we also included the other three sense of humor measures, the only significant relationship between humor and fear of negative evaluations pertained to metamessage sensitivity ($r = -.23, p < .01$). From these data, we can conclude that *positive individualism* has the strongest negative relationship with fear of evaluations, then optimism, and then *positive relatedness*. In contrast, although some moderate relations were found with the Coping Humor scale, it appears that there is not a consistent or strong relationship between sense of humor and fear of negative evaluations. Individuals with a greater sense of coping humor are not clearly less likely to fear negative evaluations from others.

Social avoidance and distress. Another aspect of sociability pertains to the degree of anxiety an individual may experience in their social encounters. Consistent with our proposal that sense of humor contributes to social facilitation and enhances social interactions (Kuiper & Olinger in press), we predicted that a greater sense of humor would be negatively related to social anxiety. Watson and Friend (1969) have defined social anxiety in terms of social avoidance and distress. Social avoidance includes avoiding being with or talking to others, or escaping from others, for any reason. Distress includes the reported experience of negative emotion, such as being upset, distressed, tense, or anxious; as well as the reported lack of positive emotions, such as being relaxed, calm, at ease, or comfortable, in social situations.

Watson and Friend (1969) developed a 28-item measure of social anxiety, called the Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (SAD), for use in student populations. Respondents indicate how characteristic avoidance and distress are for them in various social situations, using a 5-point scale ranging from "very uncharacteristic of me" to "very characteristic of me." Example items are: "I am usually at ease when talking with someone of the opposite sex"; and "I try to avoid situations which force me to be very sociable." This measure has been found to differentiate social phobics from simple phobics.

The SAD measure of social anxiety was included in sample 2. As indicated in Table 5, social anxiety shows a consistent negative relationship with all four aspects of humor. This pattern supports the social facilitative aspect of humor, indicating that individuals with a greater sense of humor, including coping humor, laughter responsiveness, liking of humor, and metamessage sensitivity, are less likely to avoid social interactions and to experience distress in relating to others.

Perceptions of self and average other. Past research has provided some evidence that sense of humor is related to an individual's self-concept. Individuals with higher scores on these humor measures have been found to have higher stability in their self-ratings across time, more congruence between ideal and actual self-ratings, higher levels of sociability, and lower levels of depressive personality (Kuiper & Martin 1993). In sample 1, we sought to replicate some of these self perception findings, as well as to compare them with optimism. In this study, we asked participants to rate themselves on a number of self-descriptive adjectives that were found to load on two separate factors, labeled *sociability* and *depressive personality*. Examples of *sociability* adjectives are: neighborly, hospitable, and sociable. *Depressive personality* adjectives include: loser, failure, worthless, and helpless.

The data are presented in Table 6a. Significant positive correlations were found between *sociability* and all four humor components. In turn, *depressive personality* ratings were significantly negatively related to coping humor, metamessage sensitivity, and liking of humor, but not to laughter responsiveness. These results generally support prior findings of moderate relationships between sense of humor and self-perceptions of sociability and depressive personality. In comparison, optimism was weakly related to *sociability*, and more strongly negatively related to *depressive personality*. Thus, optimism appears to be more strongly (negatively) related to depressive personality, whereas sense of humor is generally more linked to higher sociability (particularly for coping humor).

In this study we also had participants rate the above trait adjectives in terms of their own concept of the "average person," i.e., "decide how much each adjective describes the average person". We wished to examine the extent to which sense of humor may be associated with more positive perceptions of other people. However, as

Table 6. Sense of humor, optimism, and self and average other ratings

| a) Correlations between sense of humor, optimism, and self-referent adjective ratings | | |
|---|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| | Sociability dimension | Depressive personality dimension |
| CHS | .31**** | -.18*** |
| SHRQ | .17** | .07 |
| SHQ-LH | .17** | -.28*** |
| SHQ-MS | .24*** | -.21*** |
| LOT | .19*** | -.51**** |
| b) Correlations between sense of humor, optimism, and average other adjective ratings | | |
| | Sociability dimension | Depressive personality dimension |
| CHS | .11 | -.16** |
| SHRQ | .13 | -.11 |
| SHQ-LH | .17** | -.24*** |
| SHQ-MS | -.03 | -.12 |
| LOT | .12 | -.25*** |

Note. All correlations in this table are from sample 1.

** $p < .025$; *** $p < .01$; **** $p < .001$.

seen in Table 6b, we found very limited evidence for this. Only liking of humor (SHQ-LH) was significantly, but weakly, related to higher *sociability* ratings for the average other, while coping humor and liking of humor were negatively related to ratings of *depressive personality* in the average other. In comparison, optimism was not significantly related to *sociability*, but was related to ratings of *depressive personality* in the average other. Thus, individuals with higher levels of optimism tend to see others in general as having less depressive personality characteristics, although they do not differ in their perceptions of sociability in others.

General world assumptions. Finally, the data from sample 1 also allowed us to consider the possible relationships between the various facets of sense of humor and more general beliefs or assumptions that individuals may hold about their world. Based once again on the proposal that sense of humor may serve to facilitate or positively enhance one's interactions with his or her world, we expected that individuals with a greater sense of humor would be more likely to endorse more positive assumptions about the world, including perceptions of controllability, benevolence, and justice. To test this hypothesis, we made use of the World Assumptions Scale (Janoff-Bulman 1989). This scale has eight subscales (four items each), each designed to assess the extent to which individuals endorse a particular basic assumption about the world. For each item, participants respond on a 6-point scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

The *benevolence of the world* scale assesses the degree to which individuals view the impersonal world as positive or negative (e.g., "There is more good than evil in the world"). The *benevolence of people* scale relates to positive versus negative perceptions of other people in general (e.g., "Human nature is basically good"). The *justice* scale measures the belief that people generally deserve what they get (e.g., "Generally people deserve what they get in this world"). The *controllability* scale assesses the degree to which individuals perceive that people in general can control their own world through their behavior (e.g., "Through our actions we can prevent bad things from happening to us"). The *randomness* scale relates to the belief that events in life are determined by chance, and the world is essentially meaningless (e.g., "The course of our lives is largely determined by chance"). The *self-worth* scale measures the degree to which respondents perceive their own moral character as positive (e.g., "I am very satisfied with the kind of person I am"). *Self-control* refers to the degree to which an individual can engage in behaviors to control outcomes (e.g., "I usually behave so as to bring the greatest good for me"). Finally, the *luck* scale assesses the extent to which individuals believe they are protected from harm (e.g., "Looking at my life, I realize that chance events have worked out well for me").

As shown in Table 7, very few significant relationships were found between the world assumptions and the four sense of humor scales. Coping humor and metamessage sensitivity were unrelated to any of these beliefs. Belief in the *benevolence of people* was significantly but weakly related to laughter responsiveness and liking of humor. Belief in *controllability* was *negatively* related to laughter responsiveness, and *self-worth* was related to liking of humor. In contrast, optimism was significantly related to all of the world assumptions except controllability, with cor-

Table 7. Sense of humor, optimism, and general world assumptions

| | Optimism | CHS | SHRQ | SHQ-MS | SHQ-LH |
|------------------------------------|----------|-----|--------|--------|---------|
| <i>World Assumptions subscales</i> | | | | | |
| Justice | .17** | .03 | .00 | .07 | -.03 |
| Benevolence of people | .33**** | .11 | .17** | .07 | .23**** |
| Benevolence of world | .36**** | .13 | .13 | .11 | .13 |
| Randomness | -.33**** | .03 | .00 | -.04 | -.04 |
| Luck | .54**** | .07 | .13 | .12 | .04 |
| Controllability | .06 | .04 | -.17** | .09 | .07 |
| Self-control | .28**** | .02 | -.06 | .04 | .06 |
| Self-worth | .58**** | .02 | .06 | .13 | .17** |

Notes. All correlations in this table are from sample 1.

** $p < .025$; **** $p < .001$.

relations ranging from .17 to .58. Overall, then, optimism certainly seems to be more closely linked to these various world assumptions than is sense of humor. There is only sporadic evidence for some of the four humor components being linked to a few of the world assumptions. Thus, more optimistic individuals believe more in a just world, view other people and the world in general as more benevolent, perceive events as less random and more under their own control, and see themselves as having more good luck and greater self-worth. In contrast, there is very little evidence that these sorts of world assumptions are systematically related to sense of humor, at least as defined by these four components.

Summary and conclusions

Sense of humor is commonly viewed as a trait or characteristic associated with healthy, positive personality functioning. Thus, sense of humor is widely considered to be strongly related to other positive personality characteristics, such as optimism, self-acceptance, personal growth, environmental mastery, and positive relatedness with others. One aim of the present research was to examine the degree to which sense of humor, as measured by several self-report scales, overlaps with these other dimensions of positive personality. Our strategy here was first to examine the correlations between measures of sense of humor and other personality measures that capture various characteristics typically associated with positive personality (e.g., optimism, positive individualism). Second, we compared the correlations between each of these positive personality measures and sense of humor with various measures of affect and sociability. In particular, we wished to determine the extent to which sense of humor, when compared with these other measures of positive personality, shared similar patterns of relationships with affect and sociability.

Overall, the results of these five studies suggest that, although there is some overlap between sense of humor and these other positive personality constructs, there is also a considerable degree of divergence. The four sense of humor measures used in these studies were found to be only modestly correlated with optimism, if at all. With regard to the six subscales of the Ryff measure, only personal growth was significantly related to each of the four components of sense of humor, with moderate correlations being obtained. Interestingly, little or no relationship was found between sense of humor and other positive personality constructs such as self-acceptance, purpose in life, positive relations with others, autonomy, and environmental mastery. When the two major factors of the Ryff measure were examined in relation to the Coping Humor Scale, modest relationships were found between coping humor and positive individualism, but the associations with positive relatedness were inconsistent and weak. Thus, sense of humor, at least as it is measured by the

scales typically used in our research program, appears to be largely independent of many of the constructs that are often associated with positive personality.

When correlations with a variety of measures of affect and sociability, broadly defined, were compared between measures of humor and the other personality constructs, little convergence was found. With regard to affect, some of the expected relationships were found between sense of humor and self-esteem, depression, and anxiety; but these correlations were much weaker than those found with optimism, positive individualism, and positive relatedness. In the area of sociability, fear of negative evaluations was consistently related to optimism, positive individualism, and positive relatedness, but not to sense of humor. General world assumptions were also quite consistently related to optimism, but not to sense of humor. Moderate correlations were found, however, between the various humor scales and a measure of social avoidance and distress, indicating that high humor individuals are less anxious and avoidant in relating to others. In addition, weak but significant relationships were found between some of the humor scales and self-perceptions and (less consistently) other-perceptions of sociability and depressive personality.

Overall, then, these findings provide only limited support for the widely-held notion that sense of humor is strongly related to positive personality characteristics such as optimism, autonomy, or environmental mastery. In addition, sense of humor, in comparison to these other positive personality characteristics, appears to be much less strongly related to indicators of psychological health such as self-esteem, negative affect, fear of negative evaluations, and general world assumptions. Although previous studies have provided some evidence for stress-moderating, positive enhancement, and social facilitation effects of sense of humor, the present data suggest that sense of humor, as defined here, should not be viewed as a strong marker of generally healthy and positive personality functioning. Individuals with high scores on these scales are not necessarily more psychologically healthy overall.

We are not suggesting that all forms of humor are unrelated to psychological health and well-being. There is considerable evidence, from our own past research and that of many others, indicating that humor and laughter can have beneficial effects on emotional well-being, interpersonal relatedness, physical health, and so on. Rather, we would argue that the present methods of conceptualizing and measuring sense of humor are not very successful in tapping into the continuum of healthy versus maladaptive functioning. The measures that we have used assess the degree to which individuals make use of humor in coping with life stressors, laugh and smile in a wide variety of situations, are generally able to recognize and catch onto humorous stimuli, and generally enjoy and value humor and humorous people. These measures stand up quite well in terms of reliability and construct validity. However, although they appear to be valid measures of some important components of sense of humor, they do not seem to strongly distinguish dysfunctional or mal-

adaptive forms of humor from those that are more health-enhancing and beneficial. Indeed, Kuiper and Olinger (in press) have pointed out that sense of humor, in addition to its beneficial effects on mental health, may also hinder or impair optimal functioning.

The development of measurement techniques that are more successful at assessing this healthy-unhealthy dimension of humor will require further theoretical refinement. In recent years, it would seem that many humor researchers have ignored some of the distinctions made by past personality theorists. For example, as noted at the outset of this chapter, both Maslow (1954) and Allport (1961) drew sharp distinctions between the sorts of humor that they considered to be psychologically healthy or mature and those that do not contribute to psychological well-being. More healthy humor, in their view, is quite philosophical and involves the ability to laugh at oneself while maintaining self-acceptance.

These views are also reflected in Freud's (1960 [1905]) distinction between wit and humor. Freud reserved the term "humor" to refer to a positive and healthy ability to withstand the onslaughts of life with equanimity and amusement, while relegating to "wit" the more vulgar forms of joking that express sexual and aggressive impulses. This distinction was maintained by many psychodynamic theorists in past decades (e.g., Grotjahn 1966; O'Connell 1960). Thus, these theorists have recognized that some forms of humor may facilitate healthy psychological functioning, whereas humor may also be used in less healthy ways. For example, joking and laughing in some individuals may be a means of dominating or manipulating other people, or a way of avoiding or denying problems rather than dealing with them effectively (Kuiper & Olinger in press). Further work is clearly needed to develop methods of identifying these different forms of humor and measuring individual differences in them (see also Martin this volume). Such advances in measurement would be beneficial not only for further research into the health-enhancing aspects of humor, but also in the assessment of sense of humor in applied settings and programs for modifying humor.

Recent trends by some professionals in medicine, psychology, nursing and other disciplines to popularize and promote humor because of its purported psychological and physical benefits have also been characterized by a tendency to blur these distinctions between healthy and unhealthy humor. Although most proponents of the "humor and health" movement would agree with the idea that some forms of humor are unhealthy (focusing particularly on jokes that are not "politically correct"), little rigorous theoretical or empirical work has been done to provide guidelines for identifying exactly when humor is healthy and when it is unhealthy. This is an area that needs further work. In the meantime, overly enthusiastic and uncritical endorsements of humor of whatever sort as contributing to psychological well-being are unwarranted.